

When a Family Member is Hospitalized

A stay in the hospital can be difficult and frightening, not only for the patient but also for their family members. It can be especially difficult for a child who may not completely understand why their sibling, parent or grandparent is sick and is not at home. In addition, if it is a sibling that is hospitalized, parents may need to be separated from the healthy child for an uncommon length of time. This interruption of daily routines may cause anxiety in children, particularly when they hear family members use medical words that may sound confusing and scary.

There are ways that family members can recognize and understand some of the reactions and concerns children may have when a parent or sibling is hospitalized. Each child's reaction will depend on their age and developmental level. Depending on the child's perception of the hospitalization, some feelings may be more prominent than others. Their feelings may change from day to day or hour to hour.

A Child's Feelings

Children may have one or more of the following feelings at the same time:

- **Confusion** as to what is happening and why it is happening, particularly if the hospitalization was sudden or unexpected.

- **Anger** toward other family members for not protecting the sick person from illness. Trust in parental figures may be shaken, resulting in feelings of insecurity.

- **Fear** that they will also become sick or that they may "catch" the illness and have to be hospitalized too.

- **Abandonment** and worry about not getting their own needs and wants met. They may wonder who will be taking care of them during this time.



- **Rejection or feeling left out** of the situation. They may begin to feel like "outsiders" to the situation and not as important family members.

- **Resentment** because of the great deal of attention the family member's condition receives from friends, relatives, teachers and hospital staff. Children may have difficulty interpreting this attention.

- **Guilt** because they aren't sick themselves, or because they previously had angry thoughts or wishes toward the patient. They may feel these thoughts somehow caused the illness

Helping Children Cope With Hospitalization

There are many ways that you can help children cope. The following are effective ways that you can make the hospitalization of a family member easier for children:

- **Be honest** before, during and after the hospitalization. It is better to give the correct information from the start rather than telling them something that may cause incorrect fantasies.
- **Encourage** children to ask questions and talk about the hospitalization of the family member. Reassure them that getting upset is perfectly normal. Children may be afraid to ask questions because they do not want to upset you.
- **Ask** the children to help in the preparation of and planning of events. This is as important to the healthy children to have some control over the situation as it is for the patient. For example, let them help with packing items for the hospital.
- **Allow** the healthy children to attend pre-hospitalization tours of the facility.
- **Act** out the hospital experience with dolls or puppets with younger children. This is a good way for them to share feelings that they may be uncomfortable saying otherwise.

- **Read** books with stories about hospitals. Let the child create their own book about what it is like to have a family member go to the hospital. They could draw the pictures and you could write the story as they tell it to you.
- **Find** an active or vigorous play outlet for them. Through play, children work through their feelings. It helps release their anxieties as well as burn off excess energy in a constructive manner.

More Tips

If possible, allow the child to visit the patient in the hospital. This will clear up any fantasies or misconceptions that they may have. It also gives the child an opportunity to ask questions. Tours are available by appointment and can be arranged through our Child Life Specialist at 201-894-3635.

Before the visit, prepare the child for the experience. Give a simple explanation of the situation. You may say the patient is in the hospital so that the doctors and nurses can help them get better. Use developmentally appropriate language in order to prepare them for what they may see. Tell them that they may see some special medical equipment that will help make the patient feel better. Gear the amount of information that you give the child according to his or her age. Always check to ensure the child's perceptions about the situation are accurate.

A Hospital-Based Child Life Program

Our Certified Child Life Specialist interacts with children using age-appropriate language and offers educational and emotional support. This often helps turn a child's hospital visit or stay from an ordeal into a positive growth experience.

Since children learn about their surroundings and how to overcome vulnerability through play, our Child Life Specialist utilizes play and other activities to encourage expression of feelings and to promote a child's sense of mastery over a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

Maintaining a child's relationship with parents and other family members is an integral part of our program. Our Child Life Specialist works closely with siblings to determine if they are experiencing any emotional trauma of their own and then helps them cope.

To extend additional support to families, the Child Life Program at Englewood Hospital offers counseling and support. Here, families have the opportunity to voice their concerns and needs with professionals who can help them cope with their stress.

For more information, on this program please contact our Child Life Specialist Michelle Brauntuch, MS, CCLS, at 201-894-3635.

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